



# THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE HOLLYWOOD STUDIO SYSTEM

## THE FINAL YEARS OF THE HOLLYWOOD STUDIO SYSTEM

### 1950-1960

#### Part 4

A combination of post war legal, technological and social developments converged to undermine the structural foundation of Hollywood's studio system. The Paramount Decree of 1948 resulted in the divorcement of movie theatres from studio control, ending the practice of block booking, and the De Havilland Decision, in which the suspension clause of an actor's contract was declared illegal, had both coincided with a precipitous decline in US cinema ticket sales. The factory-style movie production of the Hollywood studios was fast unravelling and its end was hastened by the advent of a technology that threatened the dominance of movies as America's premier form of entertainment – television.

Television was a just another symptom rather than a prominent cause of the downfall of the studio system. Following WWII, American factories swiftly changed from war production to consumerism. The increasing affluence of American society enabled families to spend their money on major consumer items that were unavailable to them during the war years. On most Americans "must have" lists were automobiles, refrigerators, washing machines, and, sponsored by government loans, brand new

homes in the fast developing suburbs, which moved people farther away from downtown movie theatres. With the introduction of the coaxial cable system, a television set joined that list.

In 1947 there were approximately 15,000 TV sets in the US, mainly situated in the New York area, but with the use of coaxial cable, which allowed TV stations to transmit their commercial programmes long distance, ownership of TV sets grew exponentially to over 50 million by 1953. No consumer commodity had ever sold as fast as television did in the US during the 1950s and by the end of the decade, 90 per cent of American



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The studio moguls' initial reaction to this home entertainment phenomenon was very similar to how they first reacted to the introduction of the Talkies in 1927; it was just a passing fad. Darryl F. Zanuck, studio head of 20th Century Fox, told his producers, "I give this television nonsense six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a small plywood box every night". Zanuck went even further when he got his scriptwriter to add a derogatory comment to the screenplay of the studio's classic film *All About Eve* (1950). In it, Marilyn Monroe's character asks, "Tell me this, do they have auditions for television?" Co-star George Sanders acidly replies, "That's all television is, my dear, nothing but auditions".

In other studios such as Warner Bros., TV was declared the enemy and actual television sets were banned from being displayed in any of studio's movies. When a TV network executive called on Jack Warner with an offer to purchase the WB library of pre-1948 movies, Warner had him physically thrown out through the studio gates by his security personnel.



"That's all television is, my dear, nothing but auditions." Marilyn Monroe and George Sanders in *All About Eve*

But beneath all this false bravado, the studio moguls were totally devoid of ideas of how to attract audiences back into cinemas. The rigid Motion Picture Production Code spelled out for the film studios what could and could not be portrayed on screen. Subsequently, hindered by the strict code, Hollywood had by and large aimed at an all-age audience from six to sixty and had demonstrated in the main core of its films a commitment to family-friendly subjects, usually with happy endings.

However, following WWII, American culture and attitudes changed significantly. As a consequence, RKO and WB studios in particular had cultivated a darker and more anti-social vision in urban crime dramas, now known as *film noir*. But even this genre was no longer pulling in large audiences due to the public being able to watch similar noir-themed programmes on television for free, such as the crime dramas *Dragnet* and *I'm the Law*. Hollywood needed to offer the public something it could not get on television.

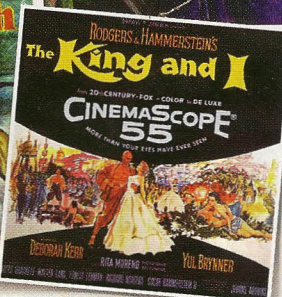
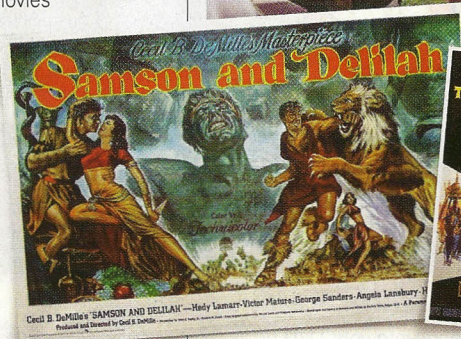
Cecil B. DeMille and Paramount Studios released the biblical epic *Samson & Delilah* in



1949, which became a massive box office hit. This was followed in 1951 with *Quo Vadis* for MGM and *David and Bathsheba* for 20th Century Fox, which were also both huge successes. Were Bible adaptations that incorporated sex and violence in glorious Technicolor the movie talisman for getting audiences away from their monochrome televisions and back into the theatres? They were, but only for a short while.

Hollywood continued the genre with *The Robe* (1953), which was released in the new anamorphic widescreen format Cinemascope, followed by the remakes of *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur* – both starring Charlton Heston. But after these releases, audiences seemed to tire of movies with biblical themes and returned to their living rooms.

Also during this decade, Hollywood experimented with the spectacular escapism of Cinerama and 3-Dimensional movies, and expensive adaptations of Broadway musicals such as *The King and I* and *Carousel*. But although all individually popular, none of them were able to halt the overall decline of US cinema audiences. Regularly going to the movies had ceased to be a ritual necessity for the majority



**A plethora of Hollywood biblical epics and musical productions were released in a desperate attempt to get audiences away from their TV sets and back into movie theatres**

others, like Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas, would set up their own production companies. The power in Hollywood had now transferred to the major stars and their agents. Other actors, however, would struggle to find regular film work and although television was considered at the time to be well beneath the status of a Hollywood movie star, necessity found many of them drifting into television shows that advertised cigarettes and washing powder.

The death of old Hollywood and its studio/star system was now inevitable. Over the following

years the continued uncertainty within the film industry left the studios prime targets for corporate takeovers – RKO studios was taken over by the television company Desilu Productions, Paramount was acquired by Gulf + Western, MCA purchased Universal, Warner Bros. was swallowed up by Seven Arts, MGM was bought by hotel magnate Kirk Kerkorian, and Coca Cola would eventually take control of Columbia. These famous old

studios' sound stages and backlots would now serve primarily as production facilities for independent filmmakers and television shows, and with that, the Golden Age of Hollywood finally came to a close.

Sometime in 1953, movie producer David O. Selznick was walking the deserted streets of Hollywood at dawn with screenwriter Ben Hecht. He turned to Hecht and said, "Hollywood's like

Egypt, full of crumbled pyramids. It'll never come back. It'll keep crumbling until finally the wind blows the last studio prop across the sands." Selznick was right about the great movie empire slowly crumbling, but wrong when he said that it would never come back.

By 1960 the Hollywood that Selznick and the other movie moguls had built had practically gone, but a new and totally different model would rise, resurrected by two particular American movies both released in 1967. The first concerned an affair between a young man and an older, married woman and the other was about two violent Depression-era characters who liked to rob banks.

**To be continued as Part 1 of Hollywood's Second Golden Age: 1967–1976.**

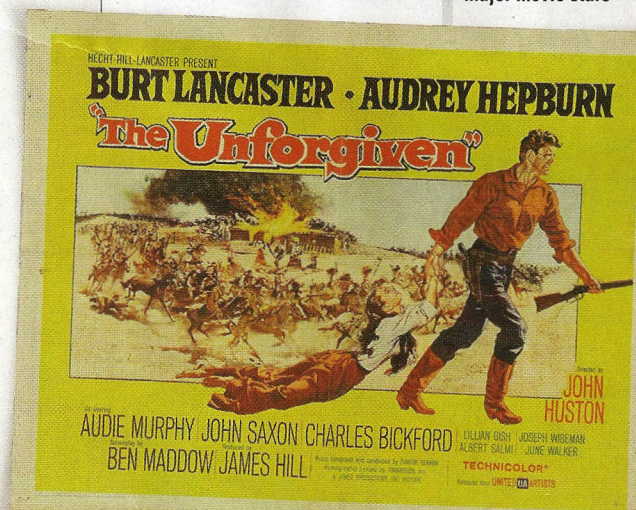
## “Television depressed Hollywood both financially and spiritually”

of the American public, and by the end of the decade TV had become the dominant mass entertainment medium.

Television depressed Hollywood both financially and spiritually. The continual decline in audiences – which caused hundreds of cinemas to close across the country – made the production of a high volume of movies inefficient. Consequently, it was now no longer economical for the major film studios to maintain the factory-like studio system. Star exclusivity had been one of its key elements but the era of long term contracted actors, directors and technicians was coming to an end.

By 1955 over two thirds of all studio movie personnel had been dropped from their contracts. Some of the popular stars would go on to sign non-exclusive contracts with independent filmmakers whilst

**Following the end of long term studio contracts, actor Burt Lancaster, with two partners, formed their own film production company Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, as did a number of other major movie stars**



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